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AUTHOR Karasz, Hilary N.; Reynolds, Paula; Wall, Melissa A.
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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the University of Washington School of Communication's project to redesign the graduate student teaching assistant position into a new "research mentor" role. This new position emphasizes undergraduate acquisition of research skills, where students are guided through the research process by graduate students who serve as role models and instructors. The conceptualization and evolution of the role is detailed, and implementation guidelines are provided for departments that wish to initiate similar projects. Contains six references. (Author)

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New Models for Teaching Assistants: The Research Mentor Project

By Hilary N. Karasz, Paula Reynolds, and Melissa A. Wall

Address:
School of Communications
Box 353740
University of Washington
Seattle, Washington 98195

206/543-2660
email: karasz@u.washington.edu

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Abstract

This paper describes the University of Washington School of Communication's project to redesign the graduate student teaching assistant position into a new "research mentor" role. This new position emphasizes undergraduate acquisition of research skills where students are guided through the research process by graduate students who serve as role models and instructors. The conceptualization and evolution of the role is detailed, and implementation guidelines are provided for departments that wish to initiate similar projects.

New Models for Teaching Assistants:
The Research Mentor Project

This paper reports the efforts of the School of Communications at the University of Washington to redesign the responsibilities of the "teaching assistant" (TA).[1] The department's on-going goals for its TAs are those common to most university programs: to enhance undergraduate education as well as to contribute to the professional development of graduate teaching assistants. In 1996, changes within the university and within our own department provided an opportunity to try a new approach to realize these goals by making substantial changes in the traditional role of the school's TAs.

The University's new president, Richard McCormick, issued a directive calling for departments to increase attention to the teaching of research skills at the undergraduate level. At the same time, our department introduced a new curriculum that places less emphasis on traditional mass communication education in broadcast journalism, advertising, and public relations "industry skills," and more emphasis on media and communications studies as an academic discipline.[2] These changes also included a new focus on teaching undergraduates research skills, which required redesigning the role of the TA.

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[1] The authors wish to thank Professors Nancy K. Rivenburgh and Roger A. Simpson for their advice and guidance during the creation and development of the Research Mentor Project, as well as other faculty who provided support or otherwise assisted us.

[2] Today, the department has four substantive areas of focus (international communications, new technology, communication processes and effects and media institutions) and 450 majors enrolled in three different levels of courses. For a description of the circumstances that led to these changes, see J. M. James (1995). Program quality and centrality in times of financial crisis. *Journalism and Mass Communication Educator*. 50(2): 77-81.

Traditionally, the department's TAs taught or assisted with the skills courses. TAs also worked with "quiz" sections at the freshman level as well as with one upper level substantive course. With the elimination of our skills classes, the department perceived an urgent need to maintain TA positions in a way that would complement the new curriculum. A committee of faculty members first met to discuss ways to do this, and later, a group of graduate teaching assistants was invited to participate in the project. What emerged from these various discussions was the idea that TAs could become "research mentors" (RMs) to undergraduates learning about the research process. A Research Mentor "team" consisting of the authors was formed to further develop the RM concept.

This paper outlines how the RM role evolved. Pertinent literature on conceptualizing the role of a RM is reviewed, the steps taken to give the position form are described, the efforts to introduce the research mentor (RM) in the classroom are detailed, and the results of these efforts are reported. While the three authors were appointed to serve as the initial team, a number of graduate students have now served as RMs and they should be acknowledged for assisting in the development of this project.[3]

Literature Review

The conceptualization of this new position for TAs is anchored in two strands of research about education: active learning and mentoring. The authors turned to these concepts based on our own philosophies of teaching as an empowering process for students and also because of the changing demographics in communications programs,

including ours. Like many others, the program now has more female than male students as well as increasing numbers of students from various ethnic groups. The team wanted this new method of teaching to take into account the different needs and learning styles of a diverse student body. Scholars agree that some groups do not do well in a traditional lecture course where listening is the primary means of learning but can excel when able to learn by doing (Vasquez and Wainstein, 1990; Chism, Cano and Pruitt, 1989). Nontraditional students in particular are more likely to be successful when given plenty of regular feedback (Chism, Cano and Pruitt, 1989).

Active learning. While the idea of active learning can be traced to John Dewey's classic Democracy and Education, more recent calls for this approach began to be heard in the 1980s when groups such as the Association of American College's Task Group on General Education, the Study Group on the Conditions of Excellence in American Higher Education and the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators all recommended college educators focus more on this approach. While active learning is often based on educators' common sense definitions, Bonwell and Eisen (1991) give a more precise definition: Active learning consists of a situation in which students are doing more than listening, where less emphasis is placed on transmitting information and more on developing skills, where students are involved in higher order thinking as well as being engaged in activities.

Mentoring. Most of the literature about mentoring in higher education has tended to focus on the needs of groups that have traditionally been outsiders to the typical university community. Thus studies often examine mentoring as a means of assisting

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[3] Zahna Caillat, Jennifer Henderson, David Johnson, Erik Krauss, Brennon Martin, Lori

minorities and women as undergraduates, graduates or new faculty members (Ross-Thomas and Bryant, 1994). While mentoring is usually a one-on-one interaction, some researchers (Klausmeier, 1994; Wildman, Magliaro, R. Niles and J. Niles, 1992) suggest that there are many types of mentoring. Nevertheless, common characteristics of mentoring have been identified: Mentors must be willing to work closely with the person(s) being mentored, be aware that they may be seen as role models, be comfortable blurring of boundaries between mentor and person being mentored, and be able to commit more time than ordinary interactions require.

In this project, the ideas of active learning and the concept of mentoring have been combined and adapted to the realities of this department. It was thought that students should do more than passively sit in a quiz section, occasionally offering a comment on a discussion in which they were mostly uninvolved. Active learning should consist of something more than students merely working on their research projects on their own time. Students would receive more intensive, individual attention, but the mentoring relationship had to be broadened to include all students. This all needed to be done within the context of undergraduate research instruction.

Methods

The team began the project by gathering and assessing information about graduate teaching and how it related to undergraduate needs. We conducted individual interviews with faculty members, TAs and the department's undergraduate academic advisor was consulted. We also sought advice and direction from the University of Washington's

Center for Instructional Development and Research. In addition, several informal surveys related to research and TAs were conducted in the undergraduate advising office and in selected classes.

All of the information collected was used to guide us in the formulation of the RM project. We decided we could address the various educational goals of the research mentor project (combining active learning with the concept of mentoring) through reconceptualizing a familiar course design. Previously, at the freshman level, students attended a faculty lecture from Monday through Thursday and then smaller TA-led quiz sections on Friday. Under the redesigned structure, the Friday sections would be thought of as "research labs," which students would attend to acquire research skills and complete research projects. The labs would be used primarily at the sophomore and junior level, though it was hoped to incorporate aspects of the project into the sections for the large introductory mass communications survey course which all majors must take.

The research labs would be used to help students acquire critical thinking by guiding them through design and implementation of research projects with a secondary emphasis on improving writing skills. We proposed that over the course of several of these labs, students would be exposed to a variety of quantitative and qualitative approaches. We also proposed that they learn to locate and critically assess relevant research materials. To help RMs run these labs, we also initiated the first edition of a manual of research exercises that RMs could use in their classes. Acknowledging that some students would need more individual attention, we began seeking space for a mentoring center to be staffed by TAs where students could come for additional one-on-one assistance with

research problems and questions. (The center, which now includes four Macintosh computers with Internet access and a variety of books, journals and reference works, was officially opened January 1997. It is staffed entirely by volunteer graduate students.)

Initiating the Project

This section details the initial experiments implementing the RM project in the classroom from winter quarter 1996 through autumn quarter 1996. Starting in winter quarter 1996, the three authors of this paper were assigned as research mentors to two undergraduate classes each to begin trying out various ideas we had for the project. In consultation with faculty members, it was decided that we would not attend class on a regular basis but would instead spend our time conceptualizing the RM position and to use these classes as places to experiment with various ideas. Among the activities we attempted were: a) conducting generic workshops on topics such as using library resources and how to research media-related topics; b) holding extended office hours for one-on-one assistance for students; c) staffing a department computer lab that had access to the university's on-line library databases; d) facilitating small group project meetings; and e) creating electronic class lists and posting course information for students. From these experiences, we made initial recommendations for professors who were assigned a RM the following quarter as well as for TAs assigned to this role. The two models that emerged from this process - the secondary research model and the primary research model - are detailed below.

Secondary Research Model

The model for a secondary research project was put into place spring quarter 1996 in a senior-level course, which was an overview of the impact of communications technology on society, ranging from the printing press through the breakup of AT&T. The 34-person upper-level class met for one hour Monday through Friday, but the instructor designated every other Friday of the quarter as sessions to be directed by the RM. The course required group presentations, exams, and a research paper based on a survey of secondary research literature. Student paper topics ranged from the impact of the electric switch on women working in the telephone industry to the use of the African drum as a communications technology.

The professor and RM met two weeks before the course began to map out the RM's role, and continued to meet informally throughout the term. The RM decided to run his Friday sessions as workshops similar to ones that had been tried the previous quarter. However, he held even more workshops and also held extra office hours. Nevertheless, he feared not having enough material for the entire term, so he taught only every other Friday. In addition to attending the workshops, student groups were required to meet with the RM before submitting their project proposals, and every student had to meet with the RM individually before submitting a research paper proposal.

Unlike the previous quarter's workshops whose topics the professor arbitrarily determined, these workshops were based on student responses to a diagnostic survey that asked the students what type of assistance they wanted from the RM. Based on these answers, he designed a series of workshops on topics such as how to generate research paper topics, how to use the Internet to conduct research, how to write a thesis statement,

the basics of English grammar, and how to give a presentation. Because sessions were not directly tied to the substantive content of the course lectures the RM did not attend class sessions himself.

At the end of the quarter, the students were asked to evaluate the RM's performance and the workshops he provided. About half the class thought the workshops were invaluable as they reported never having been taught these things before. The other half, however, said the material was too elementary for them, and, as the RM put it, were "bored to tears and pretty much offended that I thought they didn't know what a thesis statement was." Some students complained that the RM did not review class material as they expected a traditional TA to do. For the RM, the teaching experience did not seem as challenging. Many students did not bother to attend the sessions; out of a class of 34, never more than 15 to 20 attended the Friday sessions. The RM did not grade their work or even see the finished research papers, and admitted that he felt like an "outsider" to the class. Other than intensive assistance for a few students during his office hours, he felt like he had "little impact on their quarter."

A second attempt at the secondary research model was made during the fall of 1996 in a sophomore/junior-level international communications course that focused on global communication systems. The class had 110 students enrolled, and two RMs were assigned to the course. The RMs attended the hour-long lectures held Monday through Thursday. On Fridays, each RM conducted two research labs with 25-30 students per lab, which were designed to assist students in the completion of a 10-15 page research paper. The professor in charge of the class initially conceptualized the written research project as a case-study paper focusing on an aspect of telecommunications in a foreign country.

Each student was to pick a country of interest, describe the nation's media system in general, and report in detail on one aspect of the media system (for example, the country's phone system or cable network).

Though the professor originated the paper idea, the RMs were completely responsible for the papers' implementation, from explaining the assignment to students to grading it at the end of the quarter. Other than designing the assignment and setting up general parameters for Friday sessions, the professor had nothing further to do with the lab sessions. As with the previous RM, these RMs used a diagnostic survey partly to determine lab topics. For example, the RMs led sessions on basic library searching, evaluating sources, taking notes from texts/articles, and citation/reference style. One of the differences from the previous RM's sessions was that some session time was reserved for discussing general research problems each week. Students would be asked to share problems they encountered during the research process, and the RM or other students would offer solutions. In general, session content was decided on an ad hoc basis based on issues that came up the week before.

Results showed that the "secondary research" model worked well with this class from the perspective of both RMs, the professor, and most students. Generally speaking, the RMs felt that research lab sessions were more exciting to teach than traditional quiz sections, and one RM said that he felt much more "investment" in the course. The other RM said he "really enjoyed helping students become more confident" [in their researching skills], and that it was "actually possible to see progress." He related examples of students approaching him in the halls to give him updates on their research. In general, both RMs concluded that this type of teaching was more satisfying than

traditional assignments. They enjoyed their autonomy and the challenge of preparing material for class each week. As one RM said, "While a teaching assistant usually goes over what the professor has already said, the RM teaches new material, which is inherently more exciting."

While the RMs found the project satisfying overall, they also noted some problem areas. Difficulties arose over a lack of organization and preparation in advance of the quarter. The professor did not have the opportunity to flesh out the paper assignment with the RMs until the quarter was underway. This contributed to the disorganization in the lab section content. For example, the "citation/reference" session came before the "evaluating content" session, an order that seemed backwards to the RMs.

According to the RMs, students adapted in different ways to the new "labs." Some complained that the lecture/lab dichotomy made it seem as though they were "attending two different classes." Several students saw the RMs as "advocates" rather than as "eyes of the professor," as one RM put it, because of the concern that the RMs had for the progress each student was making on the project. As such, some of these students tried to use RMs as substitutes for doing their work themselves. On the other hand, this advocacy role worked out well for motivated students. One RM commented that he was able to have better relationships with students than in the past, even though he felt it was difficult to mentor 60 students. The RMs believed that the problems identified above could be managed if more time was spent developing the project before the quarter began. For example, the mentors could give input as to what should be included in the assignment, and the professor could find ways to introduce the lab concept to students so that students could better see the connection between lecture content and their research

papers.

Primary Research Model

The model for teaching *primary research skills* was also put into place spring quarter 1996 with a senior-level course of 35 students focusing on the intellectual foundations of American journalism. One RM was assigned to the course. The class met only twice a week for two hours, so the RM and professor had to be creative about how to split their time with the students. Students were required to give a class presentation, take a test, write an opinion paper and, under the tutelage of the RM, conduct a primary research project, which accounted for one-third of their grade.

The RM and professor met just a few days before the quarter began and decided a small-scale content analysis project would be suitable for the class. Because the professor was a former journalist who traditionally taught reporting classes, he thought the RM's graduate level work in content analysis made him better prepared to teach that material. The professor was also concerned that the RM should have a chance to develop his own teaching skills by leading class sessions and creating assignments, so he turned over the entire teaching and grading of the content analysis project to the RM. Additionally, some class time would be handed over to the RM to lecture and lead discussions of the material. At other times, students would cycle in and out of class for brief meetings in the hallway with the RM to discuss their individual projects. The RM attended class regularly.

The content analysis project was built around a particular reading assigned in the course. This key reading was Joshua Meyrowitz' No Sense of Place. During class, the RM led students through the stages of conducting a content analysis, then met with them

several times individually to discuss their projects. Each student completed a content analysis which either proved or disproved one of the hypotheses of the book. At the end of the term, the RM gave a presentation that used student papers to talk about what was done well and what could have been improved with some of the projects. While noting that his position was still evolving, the RM believed the concept showed potential for encouraging higher level work from students and providing them with more individual mentoring and coaching. He thought that the project worked well with this class because the professor "bought into the RM concept" and was operating from the same set of goals, principles and assumptions as the RM.

In the fall of 1996, the same professor was assigned one RM for a sophomore-level class on mass media and the government. This class had 110 students, and four Friday sections for groups of 25 to 30 students. The professor was responsible for a midterm and a final; the RM was given responsibility for the primary class project. The professor encouraged the RM to work as if she was teaching her own class on content analysis research. The professor's only input was that he specifically wanted a research project that focused on media coverage of the 1996 presidential elections.

Working from the model of the previous RM, this RM created a mini-class on content analysis that met every Friday in sections. She did not attend any of the lectures, focusing instead on her mini-class, which had its own syllabus, short assignments and the large culminating research project - the content analysis of media coverage of the 1996 elections. All of these were designed and graded by the RM.

The RM required students to work first in small groups to create a proposal for analyzing media coverage and to collect data. Students independently analyzed the data

in their individual final papers. Projects ranged from an analysis of *New York Times* election coverage to a comparison of the coverage presidential candidates received on the "The David Letterman Show" and "The Tonight Show" with Jay Leno. At first, the unusual relationship between the lecture class and the sections was confusing to students who expected a rehash of class material and reviews for the tests. This was especially true after the first test when many students earned lower-than-expected grades and asked the RM to intervene with the professor. Though she kept the professor informed about the frustrations, the RM eventually got the students to accept and even appreciate that Fridays were only for research project work.

Many students thought the project was too difficult, and the workload was quite high for both the RM and the professor, who now had to grade all the exams without the assistance of a traditional TA. The professor and the RM agreed that 110 students was too many for one RM to take on. Both the RM and professor described the project as extremely collaborative, almost like team teaching, and probably could not be done by a first-year TA. The professor thought it was a unique opportunity for graduate students to teach research skills. He also thought the project was much more rigorous than what is usually expected of undergraduates. He cautioned that undergraduates can be quite resistant to research because they have a difficult time seeing how it directly relates to job skills development.

Student evaluations were quite high overall for the RM. Students especially expressed appreciation for ongoing, personal feedback on their research projects, and reported having liked the idea of having class time to spend solely on the research project Some students noted that the project would make a difference in future classes or even

beyond, writing in their evaluations of the RM, "I feel prepared for the next time I have to do a project similar to this," and "It's something we will use later in life." Other students still saw a need for discussion of lecture material, commenting that the section was "not very useful in regards to lecture." Some believed more of a connection could have been drawn between the major ideas of lecture and the project.

Lessons Learned

Part of the goal of the RM project was to emphasize undergraduate research skills training while also giving graduate teaching assistants (RMs) quality teaching experiences. The RM project appears to be accomplishing both goals. When graduate students lead undergraduates through the research process, they can act as role models. They can share examples of their research and how they worked through problems. This makes research more accessible and less intimidating, and thus demystifies the process for undergraduate students. The following section is a summary of "lessons learned," based on the UW School of Communications' experiences, for departments who are thinking of establishing a similar project. The lessons learned fall into two rough categories: Preparation and Implementation.

Preparation Issues

Students, graduate assistants and professors each have expectations based on prior experiences of the graduate student/undergraduate teaching interaction. It is critical, therefore, for the professor to carefully introduce the RM idea to the students, preferably in writing on the syllabus. The professor should explain the new role, and clarify her/his expectations for students as well as the RM. Professors, therefore, must have carefully

thought through the integration of the RM into the class. Professors need to be enthusiastic about adapting and changing traditional TA roles in order to best use the RM. There may be some degree of resistance in gaining faculty acceptance to the idea of the RM, as one professor said, "I want the same sort of TA I've had for 25 years."

Likewise, the RM must be prepared to undertake a role that can be significantly more challenging and time-consuming than the traditional TA assignment. The RM may very well teach her/his own material. Therefore, the RM assignment may not work well for a beginning graduate assistant. On the other hand, a RM with special research interests or skills may be a useful complement to a communications professor who is trained as a professional journalist but who may not have been formally trained in some types of academic research. Thus, the RM project is a chance for collaborative teaching between the professor and the TA. This is of special value to those graduate assistants to whom it is important to gain professional teaching experience. In short, as one professor commented, "The faculty member needs to have a vision for the class. The RM needs to be confident and well trained enough to do it. It will work well with the right class, and with a faculty member committed to finding ways to apply it."

Implementation Issues

Preliminary findings show that it is important to pick a project for undergraduates to complete that highlights the difference between the traditional TA and the RM. We did have success with a "traditional" research paper (secondary research model). Students, however, seemed more engaged in the project that involved primary research, where the RM was indispensable to the completion of the task. This less traditional type of project may also help undergraduates make the distinction between the "old system,"

where TAs helped them prepare for examinations, and a "new system," where RMs augment the professors' lectures.

Though there may be a substantive split between lecture and research project material, it is important to establish conceptual links for the students. This is so students can see connections between research and lecture, so that they do not feel as though they are taking two separate classes. A carefully thought through project that links lecture and research will help with this. Additionally, it seems clear that RMs should stay involved in the lecture part of the class as much as possible. We suggest that they attend lecture and hold office hours specifically to help students with lecture material. Attending lectures helps RMs, as well, because they may benefit from observing the professor's teaching method and/or reviewing the substantive material of lecture. To keep the work load at a reasonable level, we believe that the number of students per RM should be about 50 students or fewer.

Professors need to be aware that the more intensive interactions between RMs and students may mean that professors have less contact with students than normal. Professors may want to specifically encourage students, perhaps in groups, to attend office hours to discuss the lecture or the research project. This will help students make more connections between lecture and research.

In sum, the RM project represents a way of reconceptualizing the traditional TA role in a way that combines active learning and mentoring. It allowed us to implement a new, hands-on research emphasis that otherwise could not have been done with faculty resources alone. The research process can be personalized on a large scale providing attention is paid to organization and implementation issues. All instructors want to

improve upon the critical thinking skills of their students but often lack the resources to realize this aim. The utilization of graduate student RMs can make a strong contribution towards this goal.

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